

THE OFFICE CRUSADER

We approve of projects forking to do a better job – and one of the best examples is LibreOffice...

For our first magazine interview, we got some cheap flights and headed out to Kaufbeuren, an attractive Swabian city an hour's train ride from Munich. This is where we met Florian Effenberger, chairman of the board at The Document Foundation, and Alexander Werner from the Foundation's membership

committee. This is the non-profit organisation at the heart of LibreOffice, the famous fork of OpenOffice.org now dominant in every Linux distribution. We were able to ask Florian about the split, about arguments over a new name and what wheat beer he'd recommend as a souvenir for our journey home.

Q The Document Foundation has a board of directors, which includes Michael Meeks works. What's your job as head of the board?

Florian Effenberger: I'm active in two parts. One is lots of Foundation management handling, like trade and operational tasks, going from tech staff, insurance, legal stuff, trademarks and all that goes with running such an entity. And the second part, which is the reason why I have Alex with me, is the infrastructure part. So I'm active in those two different areas right at the moment. The board runs the Foundation's daily operation to make sure it works, overseeing things and overseeing things, budgeting, and all the jobs like that.

Q Is it right that you did a lot of marketing for OpenOffice?

Florian: Indeed. It started about 10 years ago. I'd been an OpenOffice user

for quite a while back then, and just by coincidence, I got into it. And when you don't say no fast enough, you can getsucked deeper inside. So I did quite a job of marketing with them.

Q What's the biggest challenge when marketing open source software?

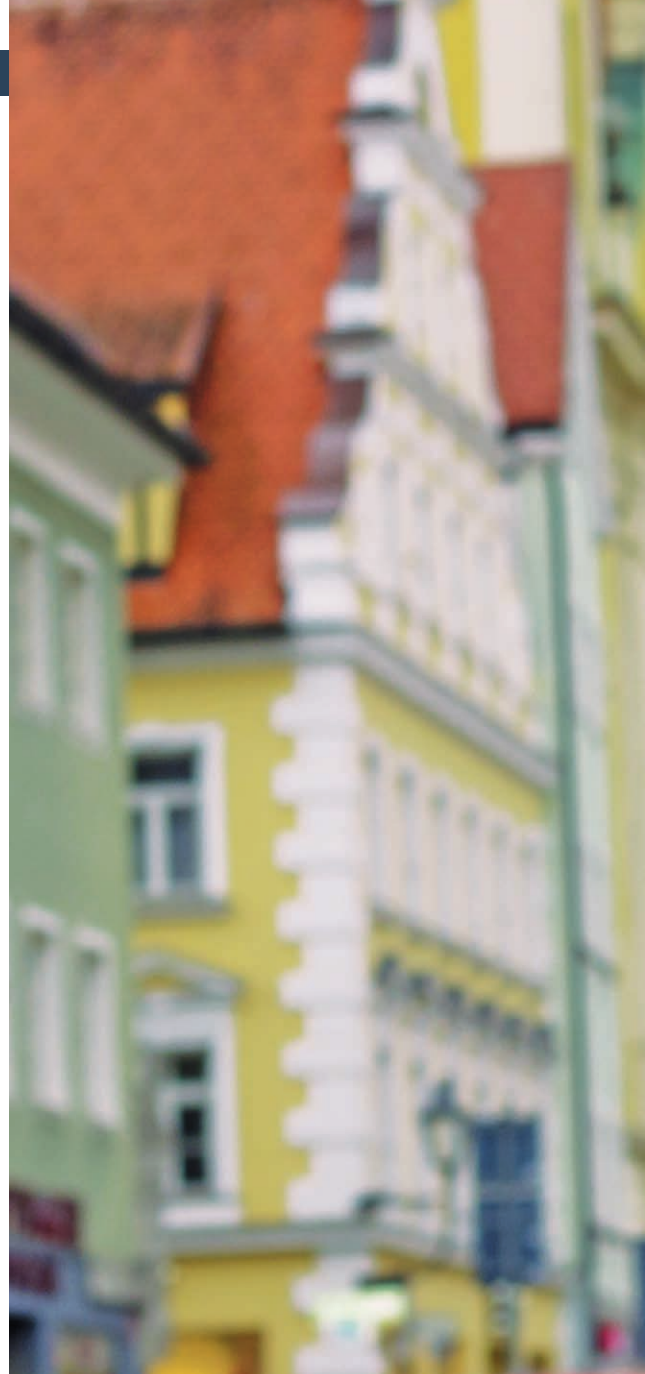
Florian: I think the market has changed quite a lot over the last 10 years. When we started, it was basically that people were looking at you and asking questions like "Is it free?" and "How do you finance yourselves?" People were suspicious of free software.

Q People must think "What's the catch?", especially with something as big as an office suite!

Florian: Yes, it was always the same question, like "How do you coordinate yourselves?". And it was rather new. Linux on the desktop isn't extremely popular today, but back in 2004 there

weren't many user-friendly Linux distributions as there are now. It was all quite uncommon.

That has changed. People accept you and expect you to be at trade shows and to have a photographer. We host our own conferences, also for professional audiences that had changed a lot over the last years. And so we have the challenges that we have to face. Like in the beginning, it was explaining what we are, how we do that, and we weren't so well structured. When you run your own conference, when you have a target market like the enterprise sector, you need to reach out and get them involved. The focus has not shifted, but has been widened so to speak. So the challenges change over time. I see similarities with other projects, facing the same issues.





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▣ Are there any groups that you really focus on? Like getting LibreOffice into schools or governments?

Florian: We are focused on everyone, because we have a rather wide target audience. What actually happens is governments are a rather large adopter of free software, so we obviously cover it a lot with them because they use it on a wide scale. So to give you one example, we have a large list of adopters in various countries. The occasional sector on the international

level is, from what I can see, not so much represented at the moment. We are running a trial in Stuttgart, trying to gather some experience here. And otherwise, there are a couple of events we try to attend, but they mostly focus on the IT target audience.

▣ Do larger groups still have some prejudices against open source?

Florian: Not so much. Every once in a while of course such discussions pop up but they are not really to be taken seriously. I think nowadays that LibreOffice is an established presence. And so, especially in the European market, with the creation of the foundation of the Stiftung [a non-profit foundation], that's rather a sign of trustworthiness, because you don't just set up a Stiftung in five days. It really is

a chunk of work and you really need to do professional work to set that up. It gives you quite a lot of credibility.

Now, instead of questions like “How can this be free” you have questions like “How do we do a migration?”, and that's what we always try to tell people, “The software is free, you can use it free, you can edit it and all those freedoms, but if you want to deploy it on a large scale, you need some professional support.” It's the same as for proprietary software, there's no difference. That's a message that you've probably seen in our press releases recently. We also work on a certification program from the TDF side. So by having a good ecosystem and professional partners, you are able to roll out large migrations and deployments. It's an important message at each stage I think, and not

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LibreOffice has seen a huge increase in the number of contributors since the fork from OOo.

so much how good or bad free software is.

Have you seen a change in attitude since the NSA and Snowden leaks last year?

Florian: Yes, I think so. Looking at the press or at personal friends who are also not so much into IT, they are thinking twice about where to host their data and what to do, and who to give their data to.

That makes quite a difference. In terms of LibreOffice, I think that it's a message we have been spreading for quite a while. Like, you have open format, you have no Windows lock-in, so we've giving exactly the same message. Of course, it's been amplified these days by the concerns that have finally made it to the public.

Let's think about the current situation with Apache OpenOffice and LibreOffice. It seems uncomfortable to have two projects doing almost exactly the same thing. What's your take on it? Could they merge? LibreOffice seems to be getting much more attention, so what do you think will happen?

Florian: My take is that back in 2010 we had this hard decision to make: what should follow. Back then, there was no realistic chance to have ownership of the OOo project. A truly

open, independent project. So we took a decision and, looking at the numbers of contributors and the feedback we got, I think it was the absolutely right thing to do and still is the right thing to do [to fork from OpenOffice]. If you look at today's market, what I can say from all the people I know in migrations when a new software release is due for roll out, like for the city of Munich, or when the first initial steps to a free office are taken, in nearly all cases it's LibreOffice. So I'd like to not so much talk about what others do, but rather the good things that we are doing.

Do you speak to the OpenOffice guys? Is anyone else talking about merging the two projects together?

Florian: I'm not aware of any talk of a merger. We of course have good contacts. They attend mostly the very same trade shows that we attend. We have good times, but we're always trying to focus on improving LibreOffice. What we always say is that our door is always open. Our project is really transparent and people can always contribute to it. And that is working quite well. Speculating about what could happen, or what would have happened, is rather hard.

Yes, but we just think about the effort that's being duplicated. It often makes it hard to spread the

message when there are multiple products doing the same thing.

Florian: Yeah, it's not that easy to explain the story about what happened and why things have happened for people who aren't close to the project. And of course, for legal reasons, we had to come up with a new brand, so we came up with LibreOffice.

We're getting good feedback about the brand, especially here in Germany. People are very supportive of LibreOffice; we've seen the statement from the city of Munich, which in October 2012 said that it will migrate to LibreOffice with its next big IT rollout. For us, that's proof that we are doing the right thing.

Were any other names considered apart from LibreOffice?

Florian: Quite a chunk!

Can you give us some examples? We interviewed Richard Stallman a couple of years ago and he seems to regret using the term Free Software because it gets mixed up with shareware. He said, if he were creating the term now, he would use Libre Software or something.

Florian: This is reflected in our statute. We have this mission statement of the Foundation's objectives. I don't know it word-by-word, but it says we produce free open libre software, so we have all

of those three words in our statement. Of course, we had a hard time coming up with a names. The problem was back then that we didn't know how long they would last. There was a chance that we could work with the OpenOffice brand, and so we didn't know how the time we invested would work out.

▣ There was quite a bit of negative feedback when you first forked.

Florian: Look at OpenOffice.org! We lived with the OpenOffice.org brand for 10 years and people were aware of that, and suddenly it had a different name! It was new – everything is new in the beginning, it's unfamiliar. I think that was to be expected, and it was only for a few weeks and then that was over.

Nowadays, it's a strong brand, quite recognisable. Whatever name you come up with, there will always be somebody saying that it is stupid or I can't pronounce it, or I don't like it. But in the end, we took a fair amount of time to come up with the brand, and for TDF we were sure we wanted to keep the name. We needed an entity that was short and even if we could have taken the OpenOffice.org brand, we wanted to have a different name for the overall entity. So that name was sure to be in on the long term. For the software, we didn't know whether we would be able



LibreOffice has thrived since its fork from OpenOffice under the aegis of The Document Foundation.

to simply take the OpenOffice.org brand and move forward with that, so despite all the work invested in LibreOffice's name we weren't sure whether we would keep it, whether we would keep that. And as history tells, we stuck with LibreOffice, and we're quite happy.

In the beginning, I wasn't so happy with the LibreOffice name. At least, I recently backed up a load of data and read some comments that people made about the choice of name and I think it was me saying, "oh it's OK but I'm not totally happy", but nowadays I'm rather happy with the brand. It really needs to grow, and you need to get comfortable with it and familiar.

▣ Wasn't LibreOffice a short term name originally?

Florian: It wasn't short term. We

wanted it to be there on the day we made the announcement, to prove that we were serious.

▣ We had a big discussion about the name of our magazine. Half the challenge is just making the decision. Then once you've done that you have something to get behind, and we think that's what's happened with LibreOffice.

Florian: Indeed! Yes, we had a long list with nothing that had a majority. So we had about five or ten candidates that could have worked and in the end we voted, but it was a big decision.

▣ A lot of people just don't like change though. We remember seeing a while back on Mac Rumours, that Apple had changed the icon for iTunes for OS X v10 and there were 600 comments in the thread. And people were even saying they would never buy another Apple product again! It was quite scary.

Florian: Absolutely, it needs to grow. If you get an agency to come up with a brand for you, it costs a fortune because they spend a considerable amount of time thinking and analysing. I think they just sit in a room around a table with a very large list of names, just like we did. I'm quite happy with our branding of LibreOffice. That reminds me: I've brought something for you, because I love LibreOffice! [Florian produces some LibreOffice stickers]

▣ Everybody loves stickers! ▣

“We're getting good feedback about the LibreOffice brand, especially here in Germany.”



We loved Florian's LibreOffice stickers, but didn't get a decent photo. Here's some beer instead.